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SOME NATURAL-HISTORY NOTES OF 1859.

BY J. R. MEAD, WICHITA.

Read December 30, 1898.

Lobo, the mountain wolf, locally known on the plains as "big gray," were congeners and associates of the buffalo, and lived almost exclusively upon them. Each wolf would kill in the course of a year, it is fair to assume, a dozen buffalo, many of them calves; but they, with equal facility, could kill the strongest bull, and did, whenever appetite and circumstances made it most convenient.

Prior to our time Indians did not kill wolves; none died but from old age. I have killed numbers whose teeth were entirely gone, except a few black stumps. Such could not kill game for themselves, but ate that killed by others. Each female brought forth and reared from three to eight young; a buffalo but one. By all the known rules of mathematics the wolves should in course of centuries increase until in one season they would devour every one of the six million buffalo who once roamed the plains.

Will some naturalist please solve the mystery—why they did not?

Hunters with strychnia finally exterminated the wolves, myself and men killing some 5000 of them. They never molested people.

There were red foxes living on the plains with the wolves, called "swifts" from their remarkable speed. They lived in pairs; not more than two found together. No other foxes were found on the plains. They were unlike the timber foxes.

Black wolves were found in the eastern part of the Indian territory, but not on the plains.

Coyotes were not the same as the prairie-wolf found east of the Missouri river.

A few black bear were found in Comanche county, nesting in the gypsum caves.

Black and gray lynx were occasionally met with, and several varieties of wild-cats—some with tails half as long as domestic cats, some with no more tail than a rabbit, some with long legs and short bodies, others with very long bodies and very short legs. Prairie-dogs, rabbits, and turkeys were their favorite and common food.

Hedgehogs, locally called porcupines, were very common on the streams between the Saline and Solomon. They subsisted on the bark and buds of trees, climbing trees with ease. As they could not run, their method of defense was striking a horizontal blow with their tails with sufficient force to drive their quills into the stock of a rifle. They nested under shelving rocks where such could be found, and brought forth two at a litter.

Fox-squirrels abounded along the Solomon, Saline, and their tributaries; no other tree squirrels were noticed.

Marten were rare.

No mink were on the plains before the settlement of the country, but became very plentiful shortly after. Now they are rare.

Badgers were only occasionally met with.

I remember of killing but one woodchuck, on Spillman's creek, a branch of the Saline.

The large two-striped skunks flourished everywhere; there were none of the small spotted variety.

Beaver were very numerous, cutting down cottonwood trees three feet in diameter, but preferring young trees and brush.

Otter were common.

Felis concolor were rarely met.

Black-tailed deer were numerous in winter in the hills between the Saline and Solomon, going in bunches of three or four to twenty or thirty. I suppose they came down from the foothills of Colorado to winter, as I did not see them in summer.

White-tailed deer were numerous in the hills about the forks of the Solomon and the hilly country of Barber and Comanche counties, and occasionally found elsewhere.

Antelope were abundant everywhere, in summer, migrating south in winter to the Staked Plains.

Elk were quite numerous, especially along the Smoky Hill, Saline, and Solomon, and in Barber county and south in the territory. I saw a band of over 500 cross the Saline where the town of Lincoln now stands, going south; have killed them on Solomon, Saline, Smoky Hill, Arkansas, and Medicine Lodge rivers. They were found at all seasons of the year, but more numerous in summer and fall. I do not know their migratory habits.

Prairie-dogs were innumerable. The divide between Saline and Solomon in Ellsworth county and west was a continuous dog town for miles; and, as a considerable portion of this locality was underlaid with horizontal beds of shale or limestone near the surface, it was a mystery where they got water. Not a drop could be found within several miles and none by digging above the rock, and not a particle of dew fell for weeks in the heat of summer. The scant grass was dry enough to burn an hour before sunrise; and I was forced to the conclusion that in this instance nature had constructed an animal capable of living for long periods of time without water. My pen cannot describe the extreme heat and drought which sometimes prevailed on these bare uplands during July and August. Prairie-dogs, except a few remnants, disappeared. The foot of the buffalo was necessary for their existence. As soon as the ground ceased to be tramped hard and the grass and weeds grew they perished.

With the buffalo also disappeared the countless flocks of ravens, a beautiful glossy bird, larger and much handsomer and smarter than the crow.

Bald eagles were numerous, especially along the southern border. Many of them and thousands of ravens were killed by eating our baits or the viscera of wolves we had poisoned.

Magpies were common between Saline and Solomon, and prairie-chickens and sharp-tailed grouse common in the buffalo range.

Turkeys were abundant on every creek, and bob-white common in dense thickets.

Most of these birds and animals are practically extinct. A few wolves remain, and quail have largely increased.